

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL**

**ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF LOWELL, MA:
MAKING, REMAKING, AND REMAKING AGAIN**

INFORMANT: BRYAN TRAN [VIETNAM]

**INTERVIEWER: CHRISTOPH STROBEL, YINGCHAN ZHANG, CRAIG
THOMAS**

DATE: MAY 8, 2008

B = BRYAN

C = CHRISTOPH

Y = YINGCHAN

CR = CRAIG

Tape 08.28

C: Bryan, if you could just identify yourself, your ethnic background, and where you live in Lowell?

B: My name is Bryan Tran. My ethnicity is Vietnamese. I live in Lowell.

C: Thank you.

Y: Bryan would you please tell us how you ended up in Lowell?

B: Okay. Here's the story. Dating back all the way to the Vietnam War, my father was one of the military police officers. Back when the U.S. was still in Vietnam. When the Communists took over, he fled to the US. However, my mom was still back in Vietnam, and she gave birth to my brother. So my father decided to come back to Vietnam to get the family over here. However, he got back, he got caught. The Communist imprisoned him for quite a long time. That would be at least six to seven years...After his release I was born. We lived on an Island called Phu Quoc, which is located at the tip of the bottom of Vietnam. Life was kind a tough back then, due to my father's prior work in the military of the Old Republic. It was kind of tough for him to find work, but we did fine. But my parents they wanted us to have more opportunities and education. So they decided to apply to go over here. We got visa in '94. We just packed and left to come over here. I arrived in the U.S. in the summer of 1994.

C: How old were you then?

B: Ah, back then probably like eleven, or twelve years old. Twelve I guess. We came to Lowell because of my father. He has a sister who already lived here in Chelmsford. We came here and we stayed with her for a few months. Then we moved out and lived on our own. That's the story of how I end up here.

CR: Was the area that you came from very religious?

B: On the island, most of the population is Buddhist. However, my father's hometown was on the mainland and there were quite a few Catholics.

C: And you are Catholic too?

B: Yes, Roman Catholic.

C: You're affiliated with the Saint Patrick's Church?

B: Yes I am.

C: And they have a strong Vietnamese community there. Can you talk a little bit about that?

B: Yes. When I came here that was the first church that I went to. The Vietnamese community has been at St. Patrick's Church for about twenty-five years or so. Usually everybody gathers on Saturday because Vietnamese mass is on Saturday.... We have a very big Vietnamese New Year and Christmas celebration at St. Patrick's Church. There are a lot of activities there. We do a lot of cultural and social activities.

C: You generally meet on Saturdays to socialize?

B: Yes, we usually socialize on the day of mass. A new group just started. It's called the KRISTY. That is the Vietnamese Youth Group. They do a lot of activities now, like preparing the New Year and the ping pong tournament.... Have you gone to one of the New Year Celebrations at Cumnock Hall?

C: Unfortunately I haven't. I've been to the Laos Temple for a New Year Celebration, but I haven't...

B: Usually New Year, the VSA [Vietnamese Student Association] celebrates the New Year there, and the church is also affiliated with that.

C: What do you guys do for New Years? Just imagine we don't know anything, which we don't. What do you guys do for the New Year Celebration?

B: Traditionally we have three days to celebrate, but over here, we don't have that much time... we only celebrate one day every year. Here at the church, we have a big feast. Everybody just brings their food and we all share. Hundreds show up for that night at church. Usually we have a pretty big mass. I'm in the church choir and we prepared to sing special songs and we practice for that. And then we also do a talent show.... I did a Judo presentation with my sister once... we did a traditional opera... a lot of food... fashion show.... Also the Vietnamese New Year here, especially at UMass, like business, they come there and have a booth and they have their name on a shirt and stuff like that. That's how it works around here. Usually New Year everybody gets together.

Y: Do you do anything special at home to celebrate?

B: We do not because I don't have as many relatives here. So New Year we only go to UMass Lowell. I'll go to my church to celebrate or else I go to a bigger event, like the one at Bay Side Expo Center. I used to go there, just to listen to live music and bond....

CR: Part of what we are looking how those traditions and identities are transmitted through families. I don't know if there's other ways within your family and maybe you know, with your nieces and nephews, or maybe kids at some point, how you envision you passing on a sense of Vietnamese culture and identity. Language is often a big one. There's other ways....

B: Ah, as for me, I've been Americanized a lot. I'm the first one in the family that would break out. The traditional Vietnamese way, I don't really like it that much. I like to try new things. I look at the old way, but I also want to see what is out there. So a lot of traditional rules I do not follow, or I refuse to follow.

C: Does that create... intergenerational tensions?

B: Yes there are. There are tensions, but there's nothing my parents can do, because I'm a grown-up now.... My relationship with our parents is not that close. I rarely talk to my parents. If we talk, there must be something that we need from each other, not like we sit down and just talk like, "hey, like how is your day," and stuff like that. We never do that, especially me. I don't talk to them that much.... As for your question... how do I bring my cultural identity out? Usually what I do is to celebrate the New Year. I promote my culture by doing a traditional performance, like an opera, and musical performances.... I also bought a Vietnamese Zither. I learned how to play the zither on my own. After that I just go up and perform.

C: Do you speak Vietnamese too?

B: Yes I do. But only recently, I just went back to Vietnam for vacation.... I meet this girl and I hung out with her for two weeks. And at the end of the two weeks I asked her to be my girlfriend, right. My parents knew this girl already. I think they set this up behind my back. So I asked her to be my girlfriend, right, and she said "Yes." And she also said that she wanted me, or my parents to go to meet her parents, talk to her parents to let her

date me. So I said, "Okay, I will do that." So the two parents sit down and talk... After that my mother came over to me and said, "Okay, I think you should buy some jewelry for her." There needs to be a promise gift.... I bought her a promise ring, necklace, earring and everything.... I call it a semi-engagement. My parents have been talking to me a lot lately... asking me how our relationship is, stuff like that. My father has been sitting down with me and tells me to go and talk to the family more, spend more time with the family.... I'm a very outgoing guy. I never stay at home.

C: Not to beat the intergenerational issue... and you don't necessarily have to talk about you, but what you see with other young people.... There's obviously an exposure to a different culture. Do you see the differences manifested in other ways maybe... gangs are often quoted as one example. I don't know if that's an issue with the Vietnamese Community in Lowell....

B: I do not know much about gangs. I am not the type of person that hangs around with those types of people.... Like if there's a stabbing or a fight... I don't even know about it.

C: Gangs were just one example that I thought of. It doesn't necessarily have to be gang violence at all. So just, as you pointed out, you talked about your experience with the tensions within families.... Are there issues... like kids don't want to go to church... or temple, these kinds of issues....

B: Okay. That is another story. [Laughs]

C: That's why we're here. We're here to get your stories.

B: My parent's generation, they are very religious. But for our generation... our view of religion and the old catholic ways... we want to change with the times a little bit, because some of the rules that they put out, that they try to teach the kids, I think it's just way too strict, or just narrow minded. Some of us, we've been talking about that.... For my generation, I think that religiously we are not as strict. Yet, I don't know, when I become a parent I don't know like how my views are going to change. I can say that we are not as formal, and into the rules and regulations of the catholic ways.

C: Is church community for you?

B: Yes, it is an every Saturday thing for me. I am trying to get back slowly, because I'm going to get married soon. And my wife, I can see that she is very religious.

Y: So how was it for you when you went back to visit and the difference when you actually lived there...?

B: Okay. Yes, this trip was a life changing story, because I haven't been back. That was my first visit back since like I left Vietnam.

C: Wow.

B: Fifteen years ago the island was a sleepy little town. No road had been paved, houses made out of wood and grass, not many brick house, no sewer system, no traffic light, no flush toilets, or running water. But now it is very different. All of that has changed. The island has turned to commercialism. Houses are changed, roads paved, hotels built and being built at the moment. Westerners everywhere and Western money is coming in invest. Land is worth as much as U.S. real estate now. So that is a huge change. Then another huge change that I saw was running water and electricity, it's everywhere. Traffic lights and also Internet... satellite dishes.... I was shocked. Wow! Really? Right in the middle of mountain and that's a satellite dish? Shocked! It surprised me.

C: And that's just been fifteen years.

B: Yes.

C: Wow.

B: And one other stunning thing that I found out.... Now they learn English because most of the jobs require it. I was surprised.... Everywhere... English signs everywhere. I could use American dollars there without having to exchange it first, they would accept it. So everything has been changing a lot. Fifteen years ago there was nothing, but now I can say it's changed a lot.

C: Do you have to support your family members in Vietnam financially?

B: No I don't. But I do send gifts just to keep the relationship going.

Y: And do you communicate with them?

B: I talk to my fiancé a lot... but my father's and my mom's family not so much.

C: You said you bought a house?

B: Yes.

C: And you graduated from UMass Lowell?

B: Yes in 2006.

C: What do you do for a living now if you don't mind?

B: I am currently working at a company called Textron Defense System. I am an Associate Software Engineer there. My job is to write software to command and control intelligence war machines and stuff like that.

C: Do you like your work?

B: I love it. It's nice.

CR: Is education important in your family?

B: Yes, that is one of the reasons that my parents brought us here. My father had already been here. So he knew there are opportunities here for us. Education is the most important thing that they wanted us to get.

CR: Did your parents encourage you to go do college, and go beyond to graduate school?

B: Yes, they wanted me to go to college. They did not strictly require me to get a certain degree. They just wanted me to graduate, get a degree, get a job, that's good enough. Okay, if I want to do anything beyond that is my choice. But the most important thing is go to college and get a degree.

Y: How about your brothers? You have one brother.

B: Yah, one older brother. He graduated from Middlesex. My sister is currently at UMass Lowell.

Y: Was she born here, or?

B: No, all of us, there are four of us, and we were all born in Vietnam. I got two little sisters, and one older brother. The youngest one is at Lowell High right now.

Y: How are they doing?

B: My brother, I think that when he came over, he was too old. He couldn't cope with the change quick enough. He had a tough life. As for me, I'm a very outgoing guy. I want to learn new things. I did activities in high school, and I worked too during high school. I joined the swim team. After I joined the swim team, I took a lifeguard class. So I became a lifeguard. Then I learned to become Water Safety Instructor to teach people how to swim. After that I became supervisor for a couple of pools in Lowell. I have a pretty good way of life. By getting my degree, getting a certificate to get a job, stuff like that.... And I think my sisters are pretty good too. They cope with this life pretty good. My younger sister she is very quiet. But she can complete the task and figures things out. My youngest sister, she is very popular in school. She's doing quite a few sports like I was. She's doing crew, skiing, ROTC and stuff like that, group leader and stuffs like that.

C: Let's switch to politics.

Y: Yah, that's what I was going to ask. Do you vote, or does your family vote?

B: Last time I voted for Bush. I think this time I'm going to vote for John McCain.

C: How about city politics? Do you follow that at all? Do you find that you see city councilor reaching out to the Vietnamese Community? Do they come to your church, to your community meetings?

B: I do not know. I am not part of the political group there. There is like a group that sets up everything, and just takes care of everything. I'm not a political guy.

C: Sure. No, that's fine.

Y: National Park?

CR: Do you know about the National Historical Park downtown? Have you been involved with them?

B: I had been there a couple of times and the Folk Festival. Back then the church was also involved in that. We would have a group getting together, cook food, and stuff like that to raise money for the church. But we do not do it anymore.

C: Do you, do you think if there would be an exhibit on Vietnam, on Vietnamese culture, would you go?

B: I would.

C: Yah.

B: Yah, especially after this. I probably advertise it on Facebook and everybody would know.

C: Do you think that using Facebook to advertise events, or other things, would that be effective to reach the Vietnamese Community, at least the younger people?

B: I think for the younger generation. I think Facebook is a very good engine for group activity, and for getting out the word, it's very quick.

C: What might be some other strategies that might work for your parents' generation, to reach them? Go to church and advertise things there, or...?

B: Advertisement there I think would be good.

C: Thank you very much Bryan.

B: Awesome!